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Iowa town stretching resources to help families hurt by ICE raid

By Patricia Zapor Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- Father Richard Gaul, from St. Bridget's Parish in Postville, Iowa, said that in the more than two months since the largest single-business immigration raid in history hit their town, the situation for many people has gone from bad to worse.

Hundreds of families are in a state of flux, he said. They're unable to work, unable to leave the United States for financial reasons or while awaiting legal proceedings. Meanwhile, they're separated from fathers, mothers and spouses who are in jail or immigration detention, said Father Gaul.

He was in Washington July 24 to meet with members of Congress. Accompanying him was Father Paul Ouderkirk, the officially retired but still active former pastor of St. Bridget's. Father Gaul is the sacramental priest at the parish, meaning he responsible for administering the sacraments.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement raided the Agriprocessors meatpacking plant in Postville May 12, arresting nearly 400 people and charging more than 300 with felony criminal counts relating to the use of false IDs. The population of Postville was about 2,000 before the raid, the priests said.

Fifty people, nearly all women, were allowed to avoid detention because they have small children and no options for them to be cared for by others while they await court proceedings. Immigration authorities are monitoring those people by making them wear ankle bracelets. Meanwhile, their bills and day-to-day needs are being met by St. Bridget's and Postville's two other churches. As of late July, however, no court proceedings had been scheduled for the group.

"People need more assistance than ever," Father Gaul said. "They can't leave, but they can't stay."

Among the challenges the priests said they're trying to help families with are the need to obtain passports for children before plans can be made to return to Mexico, Guatemala or wherever the parents call home.

Father Ouderkirk described an outpouring of assistance from around the country to cover the families' needs, and some extraordinary efforts by parishioners and other residents of the Postville area.

One volunteer spends the equivalent of a full-time job each day simply keeping track of people, he said.

"She says she knows the name of every prison warden between here and Florida now,"

Father Ouderkirk said, explaining that the Agriprocessors workers have been sent to federal, state and local detention centers across the country.

ICE contracts with privately run and local jails as well as operating some of its own facilities. Most of the people arrested were charged with felonies and accepted plea agreements calling for five-month sentences before they are deported. They have been sent to detention centers around the country, making it difficult for their families in Iowa to keep track of them, the priests explained.

"Our rectory has become a command center," he added. "We had to get the place set up for wireless Internet."

The two priests spoke with Catholic News Service during a break in a daylong hearing of the House Judiciary subcommittee on immigration, which was reviewing how the raid was conducted and how the people arrested there were treated.

The hearing itself was at times contentious, with members of Congress squaring off with each other and representatives of ICE and the Justice Department over whether the raid was conducted appropriately, how those arrested were treated and whether the charges brought against them were excessive.

Father Ouderkirk told CNS that the 50 families with a breadwinner restricted by an ankle monitor include probably 135 children, most U.S. citizens. "The two of us baptized most of them," he said.

Families who are prepared to leave the United States, either immediately or when their relatives finish their jail terms and are deported, are scrambling to get passports for everyone. That alone isn't simple, requiring people to get to the nearest immigration service center in Omaha, Neb., a six-hour drive from Postville, Father Ouderkirk said.

"We asked the passport agency to send their mobile unit here, but they said no," he said. The Postville churches are trying to arrange a bus trip to Muscatine, Iowa, about 120 miles away, when the mobile unit swings through there in the coming weeks.

While this goes on around them, the priests said the people of rural Iowa have been responding generously to help their neighbors.

"There's compassion," Father Gaul said. "People are giving financial assistance, volunteer services, offering child care."

One local businessman approached Father Ouderkirk and asked what he could do for his neighbors.

"He said to me, 'They're polite, they always cut their grass and we said "hello," but I never paid much attention,'" Father Ouderkirk related. The man told the priest, "Now I'm concerned. They took the father away. I'll do anything I can to help.'"

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